

## Retail site could be new day labor center in Gaithersburg

■ City announces it is close to a deal at the Festival shopping center

BY SEBASTIAN MONTES  
STAFF WRITER

The City of Gaithersburg appears to be closer than ever to resolving its dilemma of where to set up an employment center for day laborers.

City Manager David B. Humpton announced Monday that officials have signed a letter of intent with the owner of a 2,050-square-

foot storefront in the Festival at Muddy Branch shopping center on Muddy Branch Road.

Elected officials are holding a special work session to discuss the new option at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 12 at City Hall.

There is no lease yet with Nellis Corp. — the Rockville-based owner of the Festival — but Humpton is optimistic that it could be an ideal location and could mark the end of months of searching and controversy.

"It is centrally located in the City, public transportation is readily available, and it is easily accessible

by contractors and workers," Humpton wrote in a statement. "... With public support, we are hopeful that the center could become operational before the winter season."

The city has faced growing scrutiny in recent months for failing to identify an acceptable site for a center to serve the roughly 75 day laborers who gather in various spots across the city every morning to find work.

The often emotional debate has been complicated by the fact that many of the day laborers, mostly Latino men, are illegal immigrants.

The potential site, which became available in recent weeks, is the former Atlantic Edge Subaru store near the shopping center's east end.

It is the closest the city has come to finding a site since July, when Humpton proposed a building on East Diamond Avenue in Olde Towne that was rejected by city leaders after neighboring business owners balked.

This time around, the city feels it has a better site that will be less objectionable.

"We're hoping there won't be this large disparate group of property owners that will dispute this solution," said Tony Tomasek, assistant city manager.

If the mayor and council respond favorably to the new site at the Oct. 12 work session, the county would step in to negotiate the lease.

News of a potential solution comes less than two weeks after city police began enforcing trespassing laws at a Route 335 parking lot that had for three years been the day laborers' primary gathering spot, next to Grace United Methodist Church.

That same day, county officials agreed to allow the workers to move to a county-leased building nearby acquired last year to become the Gaithersburg Upcounty Regional Employment Center, upsetting city officials who had already rejected the site as an option.

Having grown increasingly impatient with the city in recent weeks, County officials called the city's announcement a "step in the right direction" but are waiting to see if the city can prove that the site is suitable for the workers, the contractors and the surrounding community — and if Mayor Sidney A. Katz and the City Council vote to approve it.

"Identifying a site is not the same as approving a site, as we have learned over the course of the last year," said county spokesman David Weaver.

Attached to the city's announcement was its version of a revised memorandum of understanding outlining the terms of the city-county partnership to open the center. It is the latest of several revisions, and this one has the county paying for all renovations and other costs associated with opening a center.

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